

Aleksey Klochikhin , Olga Todoshchenko (Perm)

The Missiles Are Coming Back

IS PERM BECOMING A DUMPING GROUND FOR ARMS?

The “Permskie Novosti” (Perm News) newspaper, February 7, 2003

The Americans are back in Perm, after 5 years of bitter wandering in the wide spaces of Russia in search of a suitable place to build a plant for disposal of solid fuel rocket engines. It seems that this time around they found a better rapport with the local authorities. Nobody is protesting about ecology or calling for a referendum. The negotiations are conducted under strict secrecy and nobody is about to inform the public on preparations for shooting a sequel to the celebrated blockbuster that will be now called “Rockets in Perm - 2”.

A Black Man on the Komsomolskiy Avenue

This detective story has begun in the end of last year, on a December evening, on the streets of Perm. A local journalist, who had lived in the States, noticed on the Komsomolskiy Avenue a group of respectably looking gentlemen, one of them black, and came to the logical conclusion that they must be English speaking foreigners. He came up to them for a small talk and asked where were they from. They responded that they were here on a peace mission: to destroy, at their own expense, our “nukelar” missiles.

Coincidentally, about the same time there appeared reports in the central media on demise of the project to build a rocket disposal plant in Udmurtiya, at a location 8 kilometers from the city of Votkinsk. The Americans, having invested \$87 millions in the state owned “Votkinskiy Plant”, were forced, for political reasons, to abandon the construction. What happened there was a repeat of the Perm scenario of 1995-1997. It was also the election campaigning season there, just like then in Perm, and the local administration, to stay in power, was ready to sacrifice the \$400 million in investments that would have been brought in by the rockets disposal program. The Perm scenario was reproduced to a dot: slogans calling for clear skies overhead forever, the meeting of citizens of the proud city of Votkinsk, the city’s Duma resolution to conduct a

referendum, the decision of the Supreme Court of the autonomous republic of Udmurtiya to cancel the referendum, etc.

The dynamics of the battle are best illustrated by headlines in the local press for 1999. They were beginning with the innocuous “The Experiment with the Udmurt Accent”, or a bit mocking “Our Missiles will be Screwed Properly”. Then the headlines’ tone became tense: “The Fate of the Project is in the Hands of Ecologists” and “How Can We Avoid Dioxin Poisoning?”, and finally accelerated to “A Ghost over the Votkin’s Wasteland” and “Our City is Featured in the Internet, and the Time to Get Armed with Sticks Has Come”.

The resolution by the head of the Udmurtiya government, Yuriy Pitkevich, to annul the decision on building the disposal plant, which was signed in March of the previous year, put Russia in a difficult situation. According to START-1 and START-2 treaties, we are required to destroy a part of the strategic nuclear missiles arsenal inherited from the USSR, and without outside help, at that. However, since the US is interested in reducing the arsenal of its former adversary, and in accordance with the Nunn – Lugar bill of 1991, they are willing to contribute heavily to the cause. The \$10 billion program to dispose of the Soviet chemical weapons is being now successfully implemented. The program on utilization of nuclear warheads is also proceeding without creating major controversies. But as to disposal of missiles themselves, or more exactly their bodies and the fuel, the program has already twice failed to get off ground.

Everybody is Passing the Buck to the Governor

It did not take long to find the Perm enterprises that could be involved in negotiations with the Americans. There is no need to build a new plant in Perm, since everything needed is already here. The conglomerate “Iskra” (*Spark*) develops and produces rocket engines, the Kirov’s plant in Zakamsk produces rocket fuel. It was there, at the R&D department of the Kirov’s plant, that, in the mid-90es, the test facilities for environmentally safe disposal of rocket engines were to be completed, with American money. Prior to that, they were conducting open air tests, with exhaust of the engines released straight into the atmosphere.

However, this time, the main contractor will be the “Mashinostroitel” chemical plant, as I was told by sources that requested anonymity. This was where to I made the first telephone call. However, with the Director General, Vladimir Lomaev, being away on a business trip till the end of January, nobody took upon himself the responsibility to comment on the story told by the strolling Americans. Though, nobody denied that there were negotiations in progress, “There is

no contract so far. Better call in a few months, even better in a half a year. Then we could talk the specifics.” And that despite the unconfirmed reports that one rocket was being utilized at that very time, and 6 other were in the pipeline. A formal inquiry sent to the Director on January 30 remains unanswered. Instead, during one of the conversations, a plant official made a seemingly casual reference to Grigoriy Pasko¹, a journalist, recently released from prison.

Fortunately, representatives of the Kirov’s plant and the “Iskra” conglomerate prove to be more cooperative. The “Iskra’s” chief design engineer, Mikhail Sokolovskiy said that his organization’s participation in the program will be mainly in working with the technical documentation to see their project through to the completion. Also, in collaboration with the Perm State University of Technology, the “Iskra” has developed a unique technology for pyrolysis and utilization of composite materials, which was awarded last year a gold medal in Brussels, at the World Exhibition of Innovation, Research and New Technologies. The parts of the missiles that are made of composite materials can be now converted into hydrocarbons that can be recycled, instead of burying the materials under the ground, as it was done before. The utilization furnace could later be used for garbage disposal, which would have helped solve many problems for the city.

But, unfortunately, one cannot hope any longer to complete the furnace construction with money provided by the Uncle Sam. Six years ago the Americans were still willing to talk about the financial support, but now it is too late. The Udmurtiya experience has taught the Americans to stop playing sugar daddy, and now they talk tough: here is the money, here is the technology by Lockheed – Martin, go and burn the rockets. They are not even interested now in what would happen to the burned out rockets: the only requirement – there should be no fuel in them left. In the same way, the R&D department of the Kirov’s plant (also known as the Polymers Research Institute) has been left without American investments, though it continued for all these years plodding along with the work on the ecologically clean rocket test facility that could also be used to burn out rockets’ fuel. The head of the Institute, Anatoliy Talalaev, says that the years long epic construction work will be finally over in 2003, and the test facility built exclusively with Russian money will be used exclusively to serve needs of Russia. Though Talalaev did mention the 770 million rubles that passed them by in 1995, he sounded bitter and unwilling to elaborate on the subject. In any case, he did not deny that the rockets utilization is coming back to Perm.

¹ Grigoriy Pasko, a journalist and a naval officer, who worked for a newspaper published by the Pacific Fleet, was arrested in 1997 on charges of treason. After almost two years in detention, he was acquitted of the treason charges, but then, in 2001 he was again tried on the same charges and sentenced to 4 years in a labor camp. He was released after serving 13 month of the sentence. It is widely believed that Pasko was persecuted for public exposure of environmentally damaging practices in the Pacific Fleet, such as release of radioactive waste into the ocean.

While either “Iskra” or the Polymers Research Institute could have easily become the head organization of the utilization program, had they wanted to, neither of them is coming forward. All who have been burned by the rocket scandal of the mid-90es have become allergic to the word “utilization”. And everybody in unison is passing the buck to the region administration, where the political decision should be taken. Perhaps the reason for referring the decision to the top being that it had been the present Governor’s team that was swayed by the popular anti-rocket sentiment and was almost forced to go to a referendum over the issue.

Here Is Not Udmurtiya, You Know

In any case, the rockets will have to be utilized somewhere, and the only choice is either Perm or Biisk², since nowhere else suitable conditions for their disposal exist. But, for face saving reasons, the project should be presented to the public in the best light possible, as beneficial to the Kama³ region.

However, at the moment, it is hard to make it look good. The Americans are not likely to finance neither the indoors, environmentally safe test and disposal facilities in Zakamsk, nor the “Iskra” pyrolysis program. What is left, then? Disposal by the “good old” means, *al fresco*, with all the ensuing environmental consequences? What we have been fighting for then, one may ask.

Of course, the public perception has changed, as compared with 1995, when a commoner at the words “destruction of rockets” would imagine a nuclear mushroom over Perm, and would turn the deaf ear to the argument that the warheads are disposed of at a completely different location, and that no traces of induced radiation were ever found on the bodies of the rockets. The very wording of the question put up for the proposed referendum, “Would you agree to making Perm the home of a base for utilization of strategic solid fuel missiles?” was enough to shock the residents. This was hardly a question to which anybody would say “yes”.

It would have been a different story if the arguments “for” were also present in the ballot: that the utilized rockets will have their warheads removed, that the rockets have been burned in the vicinity of Perm for tens of years, that the utilization will be subjected to strict ecological control, and, most important, the Americans will invest hundreds of millions of dollars into the local economy, which will create thousands of new jobs.

² A city in the Altai region of Siberia.

³ The city of Perm stands on the Kama, a river in the Urals.

The problem of today is a different one: how to sweet-talk the Americans into investing at least something, before they get fed up and leave the Russians to clean up after themselves, on their own, their nuclear stockpiles?

The silence surrounding this project, as it would be the case with any project of public importance, could destroy any remaining good will of the public the rocket utilization program may still enjoy. If there is secrecy, then something is wrong. It would be much better to respond directly and honestly to the questions arising in connection with the renewed negotiations with the Americans.

And the first question is: what volume of utilization we are talking about? Should the Americans finance only open air fuel burning, would the amount of exhaust fit into the Russian environmental standards? Is the funding adequate to resolve environmental issues? What is the Russian share of the program and is it fully financed? What would be the environmental control procedures? How the rockets' bodies will be utilized?

In the course of the investigation I heard various views regarding the program, including some unabashedly anti-American. Some top brass of the Kirov's plant recalling the American unilateral withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistics Missiles Treaty suggested stopping any utilization, and just putting the missiles in storage. Just in case they become handy.

In any case, so far no one is saying that all of the 916 mid-flight engines of the redundant missiles will be utilized in Perm. Some vague rumors suggest that the current negotiations conducted by the "Mashinostroitel" plant concern only the "Ukrainian missiles", that is the SS-22 missiles formerly based in the Ukraine. Incidentally, the Ukraine is currently utilizing rockets, with American financing, using hydromonitors, as provided by a unique technology developed by the Thiokol Corp.. It is said the water coming out of the process is so clean it is used in fish husbandry.

The idea to build the same processing plant in the Kama region, that is to avoid burning and the ecological problems it produces, is circulating in the corridors of our regional administration. This would also help out the depressed Kizelovskiy coal basin, which is named as a possible building site. From the existing programs, this is the most expensive one, but one that would give the Americans a guarantee that the money they spend will be the money spent exclusively on disarmament. The indoors burning facility of the Polymers Institute can be used for rockets testing as well, while the hydromonitors' only function is destruction.

An indication that the Americans indeed are returning to Perm to stay is the brazen rumor that allegedly 20 apartments have been already bought to house them. The rumor so far was impossible to confirm.

Well, let's go for a stroll in the Perm's streets...

English translation © Efreem Yankelevich, efrem@englishwriting.ru

[TO THE CONTENT PAGE](#)